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Looking Back at Theory

- Nicholas Birns, *Theory after Theory. An Intellectual History of Literary Theory from 1950 to the Early 21st Century*. Peterborough, Ont./New York: Broadview Press 2010. 345 p. [Price: EUR 22,99] ISBN: 978-1-551-11933-5.

1. Introduction

In recent years it has become rather fashionable to claim that literary and cultural studies have entered an era »after theory«. In 1999, David Scott Kastan published *Shakespeare After Theory*, Valentine Cunningham *Reading After Theory* in 2002 and Terry Eagleton *After Theory* in 2003. ›Theory‹, it seems, had run its course by the beginning of the new millennium. For somebody unfamiliar with literary studies of the past fifty years, this whole scenario must sound utterly strange: how can one properly investigate literature in an academic environment without some theoretical presumptions? Of course, ›theory‹ in this context does not refer to the general meaning of the term but rather to a very specific usage that comes up in the 1960s and begins its gradual decline already some twenty years later. Although this use of the term theory is very special or even narrow, it is nevertheless immensely difficult to grasp, as Jonathan Culler writes:

Theory in literary studies is not an account of the nature of literature or methods for its study [...]. It's a body of thinking and writing whose limits are exceedingly hard to define. [...] The most convenient designation of this miscellaneous genre is simply the nickname theory, which has come to designate works that succeed in challenging and reorienting thinking in fields other than those to which they apparently belong.¹

To describe and take account of this notion of theory or of the theoretical movement in literary studies in the second half of the 20th century is the task Nicholas Birns sets himself in his encompassing study *Theory after Theory*. However, the title of the book is strangely misleading. It is neither a thoroughly theoretical book – although it treats theory as its sole topic – nor is it really concerned with a contemporary theory *after* ›theory‹. The subtitle *An Intellectual History of Literary Theory from 1950 to the Early 21st Century* is much more to the point, as Birns's book, whose scope is nothing less than impressive, provides an overview of the different schools and writers subsumed under the umbrella term.

2. Beginnings

In seven chapters, Birns aims at describing late 20th-century literary criticism in all of its sub-disciplines by introducing its main thinkers. After a chapter on Michel Foucault and one on Jacques Derrida as the two single most important theorists, Birns investigates Feminist Theory, Anti-Racist Theory, Post-Colonial Theory and Queer Theory to end with an overview of the state of the art in the 21st century. The book begins, though, with an extensive preface in which Birns describes the state of theory in the 1950s, identifying the New Critics, the New York Intellectuals and the Leavisites as the main protagonists. The New Critics' focus on close reading created a theoretical atmosphere that is, according to Birns, characterized by the attempt to interpret literature according to the paradigm of what he calls the »resolved symbolic« (11 ff. and passim), i.e. the tendency to insist that a poem »has a coherent, indissoluble

meaning, making the text determinate and ›resolved‹ (15). The fact that the New Critics investigated just a very small and elitist literary canon led to a crisis that eventually paved the way for ›theory‹ (cf. 30).

Despite the inclusion of F.R. Leavis and his school, which was based at Cambridge University, the overall focus of Birns's preface is not on theory as an abstract entity but on theory as it entered American academic institutions some time in the 1960s, a focus which is also characteristic for the rest of the book. This choice is not unproblematic. On the one hand, the concentration on literary studies in the US virtually excludes any important theoretical school such as Russian Formalism as taking place before or outside of theory. The following quote is symptomatic: »It must be realized that many European intellectuals who were alive and active in the 1950s, such as George Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, Walter Benjamin, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Theodor Adorno, were either not known in the English-speaking world or not seen as relevant to literature. (Now these intellectuals are considered proto-theorists.)« (23) To anybody writing outside the US, the description of some of the most important thinkers of the 20th century as »proto-theorists« must be considered if not utterly narrow-minded then at least quite amusing. Furthermore, this restriction of theory to the influence of Derrida on American literary criticism, which is most plainly visible in the variations of the term deconstruction in each of the chapter headings, renders the entire gargantuan project problematic. It ignores that theory is not a vogue that comes and goes but is intrinsic to the discipline of literary studies as such, even in its rejection of theory – a main point made by de Man in his famous essay »Resistance to Theory«. It is therefore one of the benefits of Terry Eagleton's widely popular and influential *Literary Theory* of 1983 to begin with a chapter on the question »What is Literature?« In this opening chapter, he states: »If there is such a thing as literary theory, then it would seem obvious that there is something called literature which it is the theory of.«² Although to outsiders of academic literary studies this may seem to be a question easy to answer, this is far from being the case, as Eagleton has to admit himself. In this sense, Birns's study is not concerned with the theoretical problems posed by literature and the act of reading and understanding, but solely traces the history of Deconstruction in American literary studies.

3. Taking Account of Deconstruction

As said before, Birns treats Foucault and Derrida as having triggered ›theory‹ after the crisis of the 1950s: »Foucault and Derrida were the two ›big names‹ of the theoretical era. They were the two thinkers whose names evoked the most cheers or shudders in the corridors of academic departments.« (46) Of the two, Birns considers Derrida surely to be more important, at least most influential. It is only in the third chapter on Derrida that the term ›post-structuralism‹ is introduced – and with it the linguistic turn, the radical restructuring of literary studies in the wake of Saussure's investigations into the nature of language. Here it becomes evident that Birns pays less attention to abstract concepts and rather concentrates on people and constellations. This dense history of the different schools has many merits because we can actually trace the history of the development of different lines of thought. For instance, a traditional approach to literary theory, resembling a grand and teleological narrative beginning with Saussure, leading via Czech and Russian Formalism to Structuralism and ending with Deconstruction, can be replaced by the history of actual schools, people developing their ideas in a given academic environment. In this case it is a matter of debate whether one should really discuss Judith Butler in the chapter on Queer studies and not in the one on Gender Studies (cf. 267 f.), or whether the Marxist Fredric Jameson was really the most important inspiration for New Historicism rather than, say, Clifford Geertz or Foucault (cf. 111

f.). But at the same time this approach also renders the very combinations of topics questionable. The main bulk of the sub-chapter on the de Man scandal concerning the posthumous discovery that the most important deconstructive literary scholar wrote journalistic articles for a Belgian pro-Nazi newspaper in his youth is concerned with the rhetorical, aesthetic and psychological theory of the sublime from Longinus to Burke and Kant and afterwards with Gérard Genette's narratology (cf. 101–106). This is puzzling, as this rather random chain of associations gives the reader the impression of following the author clicking on a link in the middle of an article published on the internet. Furthermore, the approach also tends to neglect the fundamental critique of agency and authorship discussed in the 1960s. Considering what Derrida actually did write and what he has come to stand for, it is confusing to read that »Derrida is saying, basically, that no one can truly do deconstruction unless one is Derrida or is willing and able to conduct Deconstruction in a Derridean style.« (87)

4. Theoretical Schools. Past and Present

The focus on individuals, constellations and schools also shapes the ensuing chapters. The chapter on feminist theory does not only give an overview of the most important theses and waves of feminist thought, it also provides an insight into the working conditions of women in the academia as a vital background to the development of key feminist theses. Yet again, it is highly doubtful whether a reduction to these given circumstances really does the sophisticated gender criticism developed in the past 50 years justice: »For instance, the largest annual literary academic meeting, the Modern Language Association (MLA) convention, was held just after Christmas, making it very difficult for mothers and grandmothers to attend the convention and also be with their families during the holidays.« (153) Notwithstanding the fact that it is also quite difficult for fathers and grandfathers to attend the convention and be with their families at the same time, it is not this image of women primarily as mothers and only then as academics that feminist criticism has struggled for in the past century.

The ensuing chapter gives an overview of anti-racist theory, tracing the history of anti-racist fiction as much as giving the reader an idea of the theoretical development in the field. The chapter, which Birns presents as a success story, ends with a focus on Barack Obama's first victory and his election as president, but whether anti-racist theory really »preserved the way for him in terms of discourse and of representation« (216) may be considered as a matter of debate.

The following chapter on post-colonial theory focuses on the writings of Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, as well as on the notions of hybridity and ›writing back‹. But, as opposed to feminism and anti-racism, Birns claims on a nationalistic note, that the end of theory in this realm is not crowned with success:

The biggest mistake that the rhetoric of both post-colonialism and globalization made was underrating the persistence of nationalism and how the nation, despite being ›imagined‹, may be productive of meaningful discourse. [...] This underrating of nationhood foretold that interesting developments might come in the future (when the nation was allowed to come a bit more back into fashion) from a sharpened idea of what a national literature was.
(256 f.)

The chapter on Queer Theory is very brief and therefore might have been included in the chapter on gender theory, although, on the other hand, the importance of the topic, especially for contemporary theory, is positively stressed. The focus of this chapter is on the notion of

performativity of gender developed in the writings of Judith Butler and Judith Halberstam and on how normativity is culturally produced rather than given as a fact.

The final chapter on theory in the 21st century gives an account of the different notions of literary theory which are discussed today. Mentioning a whole range of writers from Giorgio Agamben via Bruno Latour to, rather surprisingly, the essayistic James Wood and ultimately Sianne Ngai, this chapter provides an overview of current trends rather than a thorough account of literary theory today, a scene which is as diverse as can be expected after the demise of a theoretical paradigm such as deconstruction. The very search for such a new paradigm is rather well captured in the overview that this chapter provides.

5. Conclusion

Theory after Theory is a sort of encyclopaedia of late 20th-century literary theory. Yet, the very wealth of the book may be considered the reason for its failure. To proclaim the end of theory is, as said at the onset, *en vogue*, but to give the entire picture, a gigantic task that Birns attempts to do, means to treat a whole variety of discourses as if they were all following the same rules. In this sense, Birns's book necessarily becomes the very grand narrative that 20th-century theory sought to deconstruct. It is rather the scope of the book that is, I would claim, impossible to master, than the failure of an individual author. Hence, the entire book is a strange mixture between a very detailed description of theorists and schools on the one hand and a rather random association of how to combine them on the other. The entire procedure is reminiscent of Locke's association of ideas or, in modern terms, in following links on the internet. The scope of this book is nothing less than impressive, yet it suffers from this very scope: it provides almost too much information for a reader unacquainted with literary theory whereas experienced readers find neither new insights into the existing theories nor any new suggestions as to how literary theory should be pursued in the future.

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Notes

¹ Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 2011, 3.

² Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory. An Introduction*, Minneapolis 1983, 1.

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